

Reading Summary  
Zizioulas Lectures in Christian Dogmatics

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**Overview**

John D. Zizioulas is a Greek Orthodox Church theologian.<sup>1</sup> He is the Eastern Orthodox metropolitan of Pergamon and the chairman of the academy of Athens. He is one of the twentieth-century's most important theologians of the Greek Orthodox Church. His research specialities are in Florovsky and the synthesis of neo-patristics.

His most important contribution to theology concerns how he integrates the doctrines of Theology Proper, Anthropology, and Ecclesiology. He focuses on communion and the relational with regard to the Trinity. He also applies this relational language to human beings since we are created in the image of God. His emphasis is both on a vertical relation between the triune God and the human being, as well as the horizontal relationship between other human beings.

*Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* includes four lectures on essential doctrines of the Christian faith drawn from lectures he presented at Edinburgh, Glasgow, King's College London, and Thessalonica. His goal is not to produce an exhaustive Systematic Theology. Rather, he presents an overview of four essential doctrines: doctrine as the teaching of the church, the doctrine of God, the doctrines of creation and salvation, and the doctrine of the church.

Zizioulas is introducing us into dialogue with the church fathers in a way that both preserves the historicity of their message and in a method in which the church fathers can still speak to Christians today, drawing from the neo-patristic synthesis theological methodology of Florovsky. He emphasizes the relationship between Christian doctrine and the church, including the relationship between human beings and the triune God, as well as the relationship between human beings in the church. He also gives practical applications on why the church teaches what the church teaches.

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<sup>1</sup> Background information is from *The Thielton Companion to Christian Theology* (Eerdmans 2015) and the *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (IVP 2016).

## **Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 examines doctrine as the teaching of the church, both the formation of doctrine and the knowledge of God. For Zizioulas, Christ and the teaching of doctrine is not separate from the church. Human beings cannot know God without being in a relationship with God. A human being's relationship with God also brings the human being into a relationship with other human beings, emphasizing both vertical and horizontal aspects to such relationships. Each of the doctrines of the Christian faith also relate to each other instead of standing in isolation to each other.

Zizioulas also discusses the relationship between theology and hermeneutics. For Zizioulas, "all theology is a matter of hermeneutics." (P 3) There are two aspects of hermeneutics covered in the chapter. The first aspect concerns the historical context of Scripture and the church's teaching, especially with regard to early church history and church councils. The second aspect concerns applying the teaching of the church to the present situation. In his discussion, Zizioulas rejects a problem between Scripture and tradition as long as tradition adheres to Scripture and remains within the context of early church councils.

When it comes to the knowledge of God, Zizioulas provides an extensive background concerning knowledge in general, as well as how one can come to a knowledge of God, a knowledge of God through the Son, as well as extended treatments are given concerning personhood and the relationship between knowledge and faith. For Zizioulas, "Jesus Christ is the revelation of God, so Christology is theology." (P 9) He covers the tension between the Christ of history and the future return of the glorified Christ.

In addition to the role of Christ with regard to the teaching, the Spirit also plays a role as well. The church is founded on the economy of both Christ and the Spirit. It is the spirit which brings the community of the church together. The individual human being is not to be separate and apart from the church. Additionally, The teaching of the church relates to worship instead of preaching.

## Chapter 2

Chapter 2 emphasizes the doctrine of God. Zizioulas begins with a history of the church's teaching on the doctrine of God, which his starting point is in the Old Testament and ancient Israel. He contrasts the Hebraic and Greek concepts of God, showing how Israel rejected a natural/cosmological theology. He also illustrates how Israel defined a distinction between the Creator and creation, concluding with how Israel defined God as personal. To Zizioulas, to know God is to know God through a personal relationship with Him and with other human beings. Zizioulas also demonstrates how God has made Himself known throughout history (contrary to deism).

Next Zizioulas turns to the New Testament to discuss how the doctrine of God extended to Christ in the New Testament, further elaborating on the relationship between God the Father and God the Son (Jesus Christ). Later Zizioulas expands this further to include God the Spirit in an extended treatment on the Trinity. Before doing so, an examination of Christ's return and the relationship between God and the Logos are covered.

In terms of the Trinity, Zizioulas applies the Trinitarian language to the baptism formula and the blessing of the Eucharist. Next he expounds on the church's language concerning person and the historical background leading to the use of it, culminating on a discussion on the oneness and threeness of God. An examination of love in both the inner relationship of the members of the Trinity and the relationship between the Triune God with human beings is covered, which also touches on the doctrine of perichoresis.

Zizioulas extensively discusses the difference between that God is (God's existence), what God is (the essence and nature of God), and how God is. This further leads into his discussion concerning the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity, along with an examination and critique of Rahner's discussion concerning the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity.

An extended treatment on Augustine in contrast with the Eastern church fathers with regard to the Trinity is also covered. The chapter ends with an examination and critique of the *filioque*.

### Chapter 3

Chapter 3 covers the doctrines of creation and salvation. Zizioulas shows how the doctrine of creation is distinct from non-Christian views on the origins of the world. A historical survey on how the church responded to Gnosticism, Pantheism/Panentheism, and even an allusion to the church's response on a type of Deism, is presented. Discussions on the ancient Greek concept proposed by Plato, Philo's modified Platonism, and Origen's view on the origins of the world are included. For Zizioulas in his doctrine of creation, the Creator is distinct from His creation, yet He still has a personal relationship with His creation. An in-depth treatment on creation *ex nihilo* versus an eternal world follows. However, Zizioulas uses another angle in his refutation of Darwinism. He uses a human being's creative abilities as the distinction between human beings and animals and applies this as the refutation of Darwinism in light of the church's doctrine of creation.

Zizioulas climaxes human beings as the crown of creation when he states "the creation of man gives creation its meaning", and he places this within his relationship-focused theology when he states "communion with God is the purpose of man's creation." (P 89-90) He applies the concept of freedom of human beings to the fall, showing how human beings needed the freedom to accept or reject a relationship with God.

When it comes to the doctrine of salvation, Zizioulas begins by stating that "the gospel is the breaching and breaking of death." (P 100) He applies the concept of relationship to salvation and how it fits within Christology with Christ replacing Adam and human beings as the Mediator between God and creation. Discussions on the Trinity (especially the role of the Spirit), an in-depth treatment on the natures of Christ, and an application to the Eucharist, all round out his presentation on the doctrine of salvation.

## Chapter 4

Chapter 4 is one of his richest chapters which examines the doctrine of the church. Zizioulas attempts to answer the question as to why the church is distinct from other organizations. He turns to early history instead of supplying modern definitions and theological influences on the church. At its foundation, two sources are at the heart of the Orthodox church: the Divine Eucharist and the ascetic tradition of the church.

Zizioulas emphasizes the worship of God in the community partaking in the Eucharist over the preaching of the Gospel as an evangelistic/missions focus by stating “The church is identified basically by its participation in the worship of God.” (P 121) Later on in the chapter, he even emphasizes the role of the bishop concerning the Eucharist as priority over teaching. He also offers an in-depth treatment on Monasticism beginning with Origin.

The relationship between the Trinity and the church also receives extensive discussion in the work. An emphasis of the Spirit at the foundation of the church in addition to the Son is discussed. He also places the incarnation of Christ within a community (the church), and he even inaugurates the church at the Genesis 12 calling of Abraham. Zizioulas summarizes the Trinity’s role in the church as follows: “The church is brought into being within this triune ‘economy’ in which the Father initiates, the Son undertakes to incorporate creation and bring it to the Father, and the Holy Spirit liberates the world from the limitations of its createdness.” (P 133)

Zizioulas also moves the church beyond the cross of Christ to the Kingdom of God in his Ecclesiology. He states that “the church is the image or ‘icon’ of the kingdom of God” and that “the church is primarily a foretaste of the eschatological assembly of the Lord” (P 127; 136) Rounding out the chapter are examinations of the distinction between the universal church and the local church and the authority of each through a comparison of the Western and Eastern church positions, as well as a discussion on the church’s reception from God.

### Study/Discussion Questions

1. Compare the position of Zizioulas on the teaching of the church and emphasis of the church as worship instead of preaching with another theologian who emphasizes the preaching of the Word (such as Barth)? What does Zizioulas mean when he refers to “worship”? (See Introduction and Chapter 4)
2. Thiselton asks this question in his article on Zizioulas in his *Companion*. “Is his [Zizioulas] theology attentive enough to the salvation of the distinct person?”
3. Discuss the relationship between the Trinity and the church as defined by Zizioulas, focusing especially on how Zizioulas presents the roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit with regard to the church (See Chapter 4, especially Part 7).